

Turkish leader's comments on genocide fall short, Valley Armenians say

By Rory Appleton

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At a wreath-laying ceremony Wednesday at Ararat Cemetery in central Fresno, local Armenians said conciliatory comments by Turkey's prime minister did not go far enough in recognizing the Armenian genocide.

On the eve of the 99th anniversary of the mass killings by Ottoman Turks, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan called the events of World War I "our shared pain" and acknowledged that the deportation of Armenians in 1915 had "inhumane consequences."

In response, the Rev. Gregory Haroutunian of First Armenian Presbyterian Church in Fresno said: "It's something to have the events acknowledged as tragic and so on, but it's entirely inadequate.

"To lump a genocide of a nation into a shared pain really dishonors the memory of those who suffered without cause."

Dr. Mark Topoozian of California Armenian Home said nearly a century after the genocide started in 1915, the memories for many Armenians are still too raw to accept anything but a complete acknowledgment by Turkey of its responsibility.

"My grandmother lost three children during the genocide," he said. "As a young boy, I would listen to her stories about the genocide. It was firsthand information. Every Armenian family has a history to the genocide."

Erdogan released a statement in Turkish, Armenian and seven other languages, expressing hope that those killed are in peace and offering Turkey's condolences to their descendants.

The episode is considered by many historians as the first genocide of the 20th century. They estimate that about 1.5 million Armenians died. Turkey rejects the term genocide, saying those figures are inflated and there were deaths on both sides as the Ottoman Empire collapsed.

Erdogan, in his message, acknowledged that the deportations had dire consequences, but did not use the term "genocide." He said millions of people "of all religions and ethnicities" lost their lives during the war.

"The incidents of the First World War are our shared pain," Erdogan's message read.

The Armenian National Committee of America dismissed Erdogan's statement as "simply 99 years of genocide denial repackaged."

"Mr. Erdogan's statement ... is a patently transparent attempt to mute international condemnation and calls for justice for the centrally planned and systematically executed campaign of murder and deportation," the group said.

Erdogan said the events should not prevent "Turks and Armenians from establishing compassion and mutually humane attitudes toward one another."

"Using the events of 1915 as an excuse for hostility against Turkey and turning this issue into a matter of political conflict is inadmissible," Erdogan said.

Thursday events marking 99 years since the Armenian genocide

9:30 a.m.: Commemoration and flag-raising at Fresno City Hall, 2600 Fresno St. Speakers will include Mayor Ashley Swearengin and Reps. Jim Costa, D-Fresno, and David Valadao, R-Hanford. Special attention will be paid to recent attacks by Syrian rebels on the city of Kessab, where many Armenians were living and have been uprooted in the fighting.

7 p.m.: Commemoration at St. Gregory the Illuminator Armenian Church, 220 Third St. in Fowler. Fresno County Superior Court Judge Debra Kazanjian will be the featured speaker.

Also: In April and May, there is a photo exhibition at UC Merced Center, 550 E. Shaw Ave. in Fresno, called "The Living Martyrs," which shows children who survived the genocide.

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